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ABSTRACT

An English course at DePauw University (Indiana) on the history of the novel was greatly enhanced by the addition of technology. The course looks at novels as portraits of a very flexible human nature in the context of a culture that has steadily changed, moving from a feudal system of static social structure, an economy based on barter, fixed and definite gender roles, and deep religious beliefs toward a much more secular world of capitalism, trade, technological advance, and democratic ideals. To provide historical context, the class incorporates art, music, science, and political issues through history. Using a combination of slides, art books, videos, music CDs, and blackboard illustrations proved cumbersome, frustrating, and disruptive to the class. A long planning stage clarified the goals and structure of the course to determine the scope and content of the computer presentation program. The use of technology and the freedom to integrate images, music, and text has improved the course immeasurably. The computer program enhances the course by presenting information in a form that students can easily comprehend. It helps the students see relationships they would otherwise ignore, and it dramatically increases their ability to analyze difficult issues. (SWC)

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Using a Computer Program to Enhance an English Course in the Novel

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I regularly teach a course in the history of the novel; in it, I have passed around art books, shown slides, played music from a CD player, and drawn inept illustrations on the blackboard. When I pass the art books around, the students who hold them look at them with some discomfort, well aware of the other students straining to get a glimpse of the images on the page. Those other students pay no attention to what I'm saying. By the time the book has made it all the way around and we start discussing an idea connected with the particular painting I want to discuss, those students who saw it first want to look again - they've already forgotten the details of the painting. When I show slides for the class, the class comes to a standstill while I darken the room and fumble with the projector, which frequently malfunctions. Even if it works, I can't adequately display two slides at once or move freely from slide to slide. Videos and CDs prove equally frustrating for me and disrupting for the class: with CDs, I struggle to find the exact passage that I want to play; with videos, I drag in the television and VCR, fumble around with the cords, and try to get the class' attention.

For a long time I have dreamed of teaching in a perfect classroom, one that would allow me to project images, play music, show movies, run animations, and seamlessly integrate all these elements into the class without interrupting the flow of the discussion.

Two years ago, a computer-science major who had taken my novel class heard me describe my dream of a perfect classroom. He told me that I needed a computer with a projector more than I needed a fancy classroom, and he said that Carl Singer, the Director of Academic Computing at DePauw, was looking for a project that could use technology to enhance teaching. Tim said that my course would fit into Carl's goals and that the technology would, in fact, eliminate the logistical difficulties I faced.

So, when Carl solicited applications, I told him about the course and my goals. After a good bit of discussion, he chose my project as the one he would develop over his sabbatical. The more I talked about the project, the more excited I became and the more multimedia projects I entertained. Looking at the commercial CD-ROM's I owned, I became convinced that I wanted a timeline like Encarta's, interactive music like the Multimedia Mozart and Beethoven, and a multitude of paintings like Art Gallery. Once Carl's sabbatical began, we began to analyze the course, looking for ways to implement my ideas. At this point, Carl made it clear that he wanted to rein in my desires for a multimedia fair. From the computer expert, I was hearing that I had planned too much, that I was letting the technology overrun my course, that the students would get lost in a thicket of electronic

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marvels. Carl spent hours grilling me about the goals for the course and its overall structure. While I denied that the course had a particular underlying theme (I try to "teach the conflicts," letting students debate issues that really will never be resolved), Carl kept asking me about why I did certain things and not others, why I focused on particular issues and not others, why I read certain passages and not others. Eventually both he and I saw that there was an underlying theme to the course: I looked at the novels as portraits of a very flexible human nature (but a human nature in which the desire for higher truths and the failure to find them remained fairly constant through 350 years) in the context of a culture that was steadily changing, moving from a feudal system of static social structure, an economy based on barter, fixed and definite gender roles, and deep religious beliefs toward a much more secular world of capitalism, trade, technological advance, and democratic ideals.

From that point, I scaled back my desires to include an extravaganza of multimedia events in my class: I looked for the images, texts, and music that fit into that overall framework. Carl used Toolbook as the engine to run a program for my course. Since we had spent dozens - if not hundreds - of hours working on the structure, I found that, as I scanned in images and recorded music, each piece of content fit into the overall framework. As I brought in more and more content, Carl adjusted the structure - but, at all times, we worked together to make sure that the technology served the course, and we asked questions about how best to convey information and strategies of analysis to the students.

Before working with Carl, I opened the course with a discussion about heroism: I got the students talking about cartoon characters like Superman and Superwoman, Batman and Catwoman, as a way of helping them enter Don Quixote's world where a normal, non-heroic and very human being thinks of himself as a romantic hero. This had served an important purpose in my class because, in addition to introducing the students to Don Quixote and the nature of comic deflation, I also got them talking from the first day, an important goal since my class always involves a lot of discussion. After working with Carl and discovering the theme of my class, I rethought the opening class; now I get them to talk about Barbie - their experiences with Barbie and what they think Barbie stands for in American culture. Since I can now use images with the computer program, I next have them look at Fra Fillipo Lippi's Madonna and child, asking them to compare and contrast Lippi's Madonna with Barbie (this leads to a spirited discussion). Next, I show them Botticelli's Birth of Venus and ask them to compare and contrast Venus with Barbie - and another spirited discussion follows. Finally, I show them Botticelli's Birth of Venus morphing into The Birth of Barbie.

My ability to project these images transforms the class: instead of passing a book around, distracting all the students, now I get their attention focused on the image at the front of the class. Instead of trying to pick my brain and figure out "what you're getting at" (as they put it), they get so involved in the curious issue of how Barbie might in fact resemble Lippi's Madonna and Botticelli's Venus, that they almost forget they're in a class and get excited when they make connections.

Instead of fidgeting as I fumble with a CD player, they now listen carefully as a class to the music I play, and I have been amazed at their sophistication at discussing music with which they're not familiar. Instead of my awkward drawings on the board, I can show them the Ptolemaic system directly compared to the Copernican system - and a portrait of Galileo looking through a telescope (at almost exactly the same time as the publication of Don Quixote), as he determined through his

careful observations that Copernicus was right and Ptolemy wrong, earning the wrath of the Inquisition (parodied in Don Quixote when the housekeeper, niece, curate and barber burn Don Quixote's books). I can now show El Greco's paintings of St. Martin and the Beggar and The Burial of Count Orgaz to illustrate how Don Quixote wanted to see himself; I can show photographs of the windmills in La Mancha to show how the world of incipient technology and industrialism knocked him over the head for his beliefs.

I can now tie my course together by returning to Velazquez's Las Meninas when we read To the Lighthouse, by Virginia Woolf, and encounter a character named Lily Briscoe who upsets other characters by painting abstract images to represent the scenes around her. By projecting Las Meninas together with one of Picasso's abstract images based on the earlier masterpiece, I can demonstrate ways that visual art went through something closely resembling the transformation through which narrative went at the same period. I can compare the ethereal music of Tomas Luis Victoria, a contemporary of Cervantes, with Schoenberg's atonal musicùand illustrate the ways that music also became more abstract and less harmonic as the instruments grew free of a hierarchical structure.

At the end of the course, I teach Lolita, in which Vladimir Nabokov's character Humbert Humbert compares Lolita directly to Botticelli's Venus. The ability to project Venus and Edvard Munch's Madonna brings me full circle: technology allows me to show images from the very first class to the very last class, to contrast music from the period of the first work to music from the 1950Æs.

Although we intended for my course to drive the use of technology, still technology has changed my course: the freedom to integrate images, music, and text has improved my course immeasurably. Furthermore, the long planning stages that we went through provided an example (too rare in academia, so far as I can see) of genuine faculty development - instead of facing judgment, I faced intense questioning that had no penalty as an outcome - no denial of tenure or promotion - but instead an outcome that both Carl Singer and I desired: a better course for the students.

We already have evidence that the program provides a better course. We gave the students a test before the course began, asking them to name the century in which the books were written as well as artists, composers, and scientists from the period of the books. Some striking examples illustrate the students' ignorance of history going into the class. One student, who had read Don Quixote (1605/1615) in high school, said that it was written in the 18th Century, and that Picasso was painting and the camera was invented during that period. Another student put Don Quixote together with Einstein in the 19th Century. Yet another, who had read Robinson Crusoe (1719) in high school, said that it was published in the 19th Century when the telephone was invented; a more adventuresome student put The Grateful Dead as contemporary music with Robinson Crusoe.

Such lack of historical perspective makes critical thinking impossible. When asked to analyze how a literary work might reflect a scientific idea from the period in which it was written, students remained completely abstract, saying, for example, "Science and technology have powerful effects on literature because they bring about change. Authors often write about subjects affecting their lives." After the course, that same student (who had read Don Quixote in high school) wrote, "The scientific ideas of a time period often influence writers to question their current beliefs. In Don

Quixote, Sancho Panza says he opens his eyes when he is on the wooden horse and sees people walking around on a world the size of a hazelnut. Galileo was, at the same time, introducing his research that showed that the Earth wasn't the center of the universe."

In short, the program enhances the course by allowing me to present information in a form the students can easily comprehend. It helps the students see relationships they would otherwise ignore, and it dramatically increases their ability to analyze difficult issues.